

# 7th and 8th Grade Reading: What to Expect

In case you were in doubt, your seventh or eighth grader is probably all too happy to remind you: for kids this age, elementary school is definitely over. When your kids say this, of course, they'll probably be thinking of skateboards and iPods, but in the classroom it's definitely true, too. This isn't grade school - it's "junior high" - and everyone's all too aware that senior high is just around the corner.



In English class, that means lots of books, no more reading groups or "leveled readers," and lots more nuanced thinking. All too often, it looks like reading isn't taught in middle school, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, reading will be a centerpiece of English class. It will also continue across the curriculum in middle school - your child will need to manage science and social studies textbooks, and even an occasional math reading assignment too!

Not that you'd know this from conversation with your child, of course: it's also the dawn of the age of "Yup," "Nope," and "Later." If you do happen to have a talkative pre-teen, count your blessings and savor the dinner-table chat. But if you're like many parents wondering what in heaven's name is going on ... here's a look at what to expect.

First, make sure you check your state's academic standards for English Language Arts, which are available on the website for your state department of education. Focus on reading, and in virtually all states, you'll notice that there are few, if any, titles of required literature. Many states issue separate guidelines on approved books, and final decisions are made by school districts and by individual schools, so you'll need to ask your teacher what's planned.

Standards are still a great tool, though. In all of English Language Arts, they focus on the underlying skills that teachers want all students to develop steadily over their entire career in school, no matter what they read. So, for example, your kid may read "Lord of the Flies" in eighth grade, while a cousin in a different state will read "Holes." But the skills they will work on will usually be quite similar: reading comprehension, literary analysis, and so on. In fact, here's a brief "reading roadmap" for seventh and eighth grade:

**Many kinds of text:** In both seventh and eighth grade, kids will study and analyze poems, plays, and at least one novel each year. Usually, they'll also continue their sixth grade work on reading non-fiction and identifying fact, opinion, and ways to set up an argument (although these skills may also be covered in social studies). Although it's great to read lots and lots of stuff, the number of pages is less important than how much your child understands. Want a good way to check? Read the same books your child brings home, and talk about them. Ask: What happened? Why? How does it remind you of other books? Of course, your child may disdain your intellectual company - but then again, don't discount the grudging admiration you'll get for taking the effort to read a whole extra book like that. Another conversation starter? Subscribe to a colorful newsmagazine and just make sure you leave it around.

**How to read:** Expect the term "independent reading"—it appears on lots of state lists, but in plain terms it means this: as much as possible, kids should be able to read effectively without an adult standing by. Don't worry—you can still help, a lot. Above all, don't push books that are way past a child's comfort level. You may think you're challenging kids, but when they're reading on their own, they'll just get frustrated. At school, teachers will introduce kids to more challenging forms of text, especially in social studies and science. At home, push for smooth reads that a child will enjoy, and which will lead to an appetite for more and more. It's like building up muscles in track or swimming: the more you do it, the faster and better you'll get.

**What to watch for:** Because kids are asked to do so much more on their own, you may discover some gaps in reading ability you hadn't expected. If your child seems bored and turned off - not just by one particular book, but by reading in general - tell your teacher immediately. Back in the early grades, kids learned how to translate concrete things into abstract print. Now, they need to be able to go the other way: from abstract print to clear "mental movies" of stuff they've often never seen. If your seventh or eighth grader struggles, it's never too late to intervene. Your child may have learning differences which will only get worse; or she may simply have missed a stage, only nobody realized it. This is a job for reading specialists at your school. Don't hesitate to seek their help.

Even if your seventh or eighth grader rarely even seems to look your way, you can be sure that your actions, as a parent, are all being noticed. Don't hesitate to show interest in your child's curriculum. Demonstrate that you're willing to help, and model your own good reading habits. You'll be sending positive messages about good lifetime reading habits and about your belief in your child as a learner. It may take years, but eventually your kid *will* thank you.